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Music Videos in the British Screen Industries and Screen Heritage: From Innovation to Curation

Introduction

Emily Caston

In December 2019, *Rolling Stone* magazine ran a piece on the best videos of the year which began by asking, “What even counts as a music video now?” (Shaffer). Vevo, Tiktok and Instagram TV have blurred the lines. Videos can be an hour long. They can be events on YouTube Premiere. They can be virtual reality. The idea that the world of the earliest creators of pop promos was simple in comparison to today subtends this dossier. In 2015, I was awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant to investigate the history of music videos in Britain since 1966.¹ At the end of the grant, I curated a collection of the most significant of those videos into a limited-edition box set (*Power*). Selecting them involved very detailed discussions with our interviewees and industry consultants about just what a “music video”—known as a “promo” until the mid 1980s—is. The term “music video” arose in the 1980s. It was used in record labels to describe visual products mastered on physical videotapes for television broadcast. In fact, almost all of those products were shot on celluloid (16mm or 35mm) until digital technologies allowed HD to become the norm in the 2000s. For the purposes of this dossier, I define music videos and pop promos as a type of musical short film for mass audiences commissioned and released by record labels (usually) at the same time as the release of a synchronised audio “single”; the shorts comprise a copyrighted synchronised picture and audio track in which a percentage of the royalties accrue to the recording artist and/or record label.

This dossier is a collection of core materials emerging from the AHRC project. The first piece, “Conservation and Curation: Theoretical and Practical Issues in the Making of a National Collection of British Music Videos 1966–2016”, is an article I authored about the national collection of music videos that I was tasked to put together for the British Film Institute (BFI). The then Curator of Fiction, Dylan Cave, sought a collection that would tell a story of British music videos released in Britain between 1966 and 2016, when many of the acclaimed pop promos created for bands such as The Who, The Kinks, Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, The Dave Clark Five and The Animals were shot. The DVD collection with which my article is concerned is, perhaps, a cultural product of what Jacques Derrida has called archive fever. It is the age of the curator. Music videos are the single most popular video category on YouTube. Curators of content are everywhere online, and seemingly everyone is a curator (Bhaksar). There appears to be a constant stream of curated music videos along the lines already mentioned by *Rolling Stone*: MTV, NME, *Pitchfork*, *Wired*, *Nowness* and other esteemed

cultural curators online have all compiled lists of the best videos of the year. But in these lists the same video titles crop up repeatedly and they are mainly from the US. Furthermore, few important and landmark historical music videos are cited. My article strives to redress these problems.

The second contribution in this dossier, “Music Video and Commercials Production in the UK Screen Industries: An Overlooked Dynamo of Innovation and Success”, is a report by Richard Paterson about the value of the research for understanding the economic landscape of the screen industries in Britain. Paterson was the Head of Research at the BFI when the AHRC research grant was awarded. He was a key force in designing the project and running it with our partners, who included the British Library. The project was conceived as a route to gathering information about sectors of the screen industries on which the BFI’s research and statistics department had not yet collected data, despite the fact that their moving image works constituted a major portion of all the film materials held in the BFI’s National Film Archive.

“Dancing & Dreaming: ‘Fifty Years of British Music Video’ in Havana” is a report that my coinvestigator Justin Smith and I cowrote on a music video workshop we held in Cuba in April 2018 with the critically acclaimed Danza Contemporánea de Cuba. The workshop was financed by a follow-on funding grant awarded by the AHRC and was one of a number of activities designed to engage audiences beyond Britain in the outputs of the research. The trip coincided with a number of events planned by the British Embassy and British Council in Cuba to support the country’s developing creative economy.

The next three pieces are interviews conducted with practitioners from the music video industry: Kris P. Taylor, Carrie Sutton and Sophie Muller. One of the goals of our research project was to give voice to the many women who have shaped music video culture in Britain. Because music video grew in the experimental openings and cracks of industry, the first production and marketing jobs were considered of low cultural value and, therefore, more accessible. In the 1980s, women were able to gain positions of power as commissioners at record labels, executive producers at video production companies and executives at MTV because they faced less competition from their male colleagues. Kris P. Taylor was one of the first UK-based women in music marketing to work closely with MTV in the 1980s. Carrie Sutton arguably holds the title of the longest-serving video commissioner in the UK. Sophie Muller is one of the most highly regarded video directors in the UK and US.

An objective of the project was to address the fact that music video seemed to lie at the base of a cultural hierarchy of screen arts (Caston, “Pioneers”). As David Mallet, acclaimed director of most of David Bowie’s videos through the 1980s, attests, “[m]usic video was a medium that was not regarded at all. It was like lavatory paper. In England they were referred to as ‘fillers’” (Tannebaum and Marks 7). An exhibition at MoMA in 1984 titled *Music Video: The Industry and Its Fringes* was an early attempt to redress the hierarchy. Another was Mirrorball, a strand of the Edinburgh Film Festival which ran from 1996–2008. The BFI Southbank’s *The Evolution of Music Video* hosted by Adam Buxton and BUG, an ongoing series of bimonthly events launched in 2017, aims not only to exhibit new work but to curate archival content. Lacking the conditions of free art, music video struggled to secure the attention and support of cinephiles. The tendency was to regard it as secondary capitalist product. In the introduction to their edited collection on industrial film, Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau commented on the lack of scholarly writing on these types of works: “In terms of output, industrial and commissioned films are definitely among the most prolific formats or genres in film history. Still, little scholarship has been devoted to this corpus of

films”, arguably because they are not suitable “raw material for the production of academic auteur criticism” (10).

Music videos are films financed and produced by record labels. They are products which record labels licence and sell in the same way that they license and sell music. But they were also developed within the marketing departments of record labels, as a type of promotion that replaced radio when youth music television started in the 1960s and 70s. This marketing was done by music publishers (“pluggers”) who had a long history in the music industry. By the second half of the nineteenth century there was mass distribution of sheet music in London, and by the end of the century most middle-class homes owned a piano on which to play that music. The pluggers started to employ people to promote their sheet music songs and used pre-established entertainers to do so. Securing a headline act such as Al Jolson to sing their music was one way to ensure a hit song (Baskerville and Baskerville 43).

When, in 1877, Edison introduced his phonograph it began to replace sheet music. Like the printing press, the phonogram transformed society, because it enabled listeners to appreciate music which they could not normally hear in concert. American folk music and ragtime, for example, could not easily be experienced live. The phonogram was succeeded by the gramophone and, by 1919, 107 million records were printed (Ogden, Odgen, and Long 122). In the 1920s, record companies started to market music through radio and towards the end of the decade, following the film industry’s adoption of sync-sound, record companies started to market music through film. After the Second World War, the jukebox was the record industry’s primary channel of distribution, and cafes, bars and restaurants saw the early pop promos, the “Soundies”, distributed to young people on video jukeboxes. In the 1950s, music television began.

Music videos are the work of an under-researched creative cluster and hidden screen industry. Elsewhere I have argued that music video is one of a number of hidden screen industries that had been neglected in government-funded creative industries research (“Pioneers”). The geographical, economic and cultural features of the industry align with much of the research and early modelling of innovative clusters (Chapain and Stachowiak; Drinkwater and Platt). Industry accounts of the sector were limited to Winston Fletcher’s account of the related but distinctive advertising sector. Academic interest was evident, although sporadic and hard data was severely lacking. Industry analysis had begun but was still embryonic (Grainge and Johnson). Either music video scholars such as Jack Banks and Saul Austerlitz understood how the industry worked but focused mainly on the US, or scholars such as Carol Vernallis, Kevin J. Donnelly, Diane Railton and Paul Watson, and Mathias Bonde Korsgaard produced work in the paradigm of textual analysis rather than industry history. The intention of our research project was to redress that, as this dossier will substantiate. The purpose of this dossier is to explicate some of the underlying theoretical and methodological issues encountered by the research team during the three years of the project, issues which it was not possible to excavate and analyse within the original outputs. The report by Richard Paterson, for example, not only summarises the findings of the research in relation to current data reports on the British screen industries, but identifies urgent further research. The interviews with Sutton, Muller and Taylor reveal career challenges and approaches to directing which invite further research into the ongoing question of why women have been so under-represented in highly paid and powerful positions in some sectors of the screen industries. The theoretical issues raised in the article on Cuba resonate with those questions and suggest ways in which academics can intervene to cross the academic–practitioner gap and support the articulation of female voices and the female gaze in the screen industries. The essay on the

curation of the box set highlights the challenges of conducting research in a relatively neglected area of film history such as music video, where the principle research method is oral history.

Finally, a note on the style used in this dossier for citing music videos. When the music video for a track rather than the track itself is referred to, the title is in italics (e.g. Radiohead's *Street Spirit*). When referring to the audio single alone, we adhere to conventions for songs (e.g. Radiohead's "Street Spirit"). A music video is an entirely separate entity of intellectual property licensed and commercially exploited by record labels. Few videos use the audio track that was released as a single but uses instead an audio-track edited by the visual and audio technical and creative team to fit the lyrics and technical requirements of the viewing platform.²

Notes

¹ "Fifty Years of British Music Video, 1966–2016: Assessing Innovation, Industry, Influence and Impact" (AH/M003515/1).

² For a more thorough discussion of this process, see Caston (*British*).

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